

Standpipes, *Chimmeys*, and Memorialization in the Caribbean

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WHEN the residents of Port of Spain, Trinidad, challenged a waterworks bill at a lively public meeting that moved into the city's streets on the afternoon of March 23, 1903, they constituted an unlikely alliance of wealthy owners of plunge baths requiring hundreds of gallons of water and impoverished residents of barracks and tenements sometimes served by a single standpipe.¹ Debates about water rates shone a light on city managers who sought to curb what they held to be wasted water, and on customers across all social strata who felt unjustly pinched. But a cross-class and multiracial coalition of activists drew attention to the colonial highhandedness of ordinances such as this one, proposed and passed with insufficient opportunity for discussion even in the Legislative Council, much less by the public. That one of these activists, the Black solicitor Emmanuel Mzumbo Lazare, had assured Queen Victoria, "Madam, in Trinidad we are all English" (when presented to her as a member of the Trinidad contingent at the diamond jubilee celebrations in London in 1897, and in response to her curiosity about whether or not Trinidadians spoke English), suggests the complexity of anticolonial critique in the imperial age, and we could surmise that Trinidadians of a different ideological orientation, or French- and French-Creole-speaking Trinidadians of any class, might have responded differently.² As a British Crown colony, and especially one that was not majority-white, even the limited political participation urged by officials in London's Colonial Office faced the disapproval of Joseph Chamberlain, the secretary of state for the colonies, who deemed all locals across the colony's racial spectrum politically and morally unfit to participate in political life.³ The state's violent response to demonstrators on that March day (a

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response criticized even by those who normally disapproved of “rowdiness”) indicated the limits placed on colonial subjects, even as this response also suggested how rattled the authorities were by the crowd and its mobilization by veteran activists of earlier local, regional, and international struggles.⁴

This incident in Trinidad shows that water infrastructure, which I discuss here in tandem with waste infrastructure, was a flashpoint for issues of access, modernization, and of colonial rule more generally, and the first part of the essay discusses this in the context of the early twentieth-century British Caribbean. In the second part, I show how the fiction of Caribbean writers of the last twenty years uses pipes, wells, and other systems to suggest that the project of sovereignty, often narrated as the achievement of political gains achieved through earlier twentieth-century struggles, remains unfinished. Questions of intimacy and bodily autonomy persist as a terrible inheritance of enslavement, indentureship, and imperialism. Though most contexts of past and present discussed here concern the postcolonial territories of Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago (formerly British colonies Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad, and which abolished slavery in the 1830s), I also discuss a twenty-first-century novel set in mid-1980s Haiti. In its ongoing engagement with globalization and the legacies of empire and enslavement, Haiti shares much with its English-speaking neighbors, but it is markedly different from any other imperial context in the way in which its insurgent revolutionary struggle for the end of (French) imperial rule at the beginning of the early nineteenth century was accomplished in tandem with the abolition of slavery. In what follows, then, nineteenth-century discussions about fire hydrants or standpipes index a colony’s evolving landscape of modernization and the disagreements about what shape and speed this process should take, but through the lens of recent fiction we might see these structures as the loci of memories of humiliation. Debates in the earlier period about who should pay for water are not necessarily the same as the *fictional* representation of a traumatic memory—with its own contexts for invoking a traumatic past in our contemporary moment, for example. Yet we might discern the one in the other, even if they are not reducible to one another.

From the mid-nineteenth century, towns and cities across the Caribbean, as elsewhere, reevaluated water access and waste disposal, prompted in part by outbreaks of disease.⁵ Overcrowding and flammable buildings challenged firefighters in cities dogged by water lock-offs and insufficient access to water sources for hoses. Piped water, indoors and

outdoors, began to replace the dependence on cisterns and springs, while cesspools (cleared nightly, and increasingly seen as infecting households with dangerous miasmatic vapors) were replaced by sewers that ferried waste hydraulically away from households. If there were misgivings about the disappearance of working-class “nightsoil” laborers, caused by the shift to impersonal and invisible sewerage systems, Rivke Jaffe reminds us that elite anxieties, which we might read as *classed* in metro-pole locations, were explicitly racialized in colonial contexts.⁶ Jaffe notes how colonial reformers discursively classified Caribbean residents into “spatial grids of morality” in which foul air and “emanations” of living and working in overcrowded conditions were blamed on the unsatisfactory moral and civic character of its residents, rather than attributed to the failure of the colonial state. Furthermore, policy recommendations included taxing Black residents for vaccinations and other health-care services, and withholding the right to vote, in order to teach them “the reciprocal obligations and privileges of civilized life” that they had purportedly been prevented from absorbing from an apparently indulgent patriarchal system of free social services during and after enslavement.⁷

Thus, the British Caribbean joined territories across the world in weighing the losses and gains in technological advances that accompanied the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of a new one, but they did so in the context of entangled intimacies of racialized imperial rule in postabolition societies.⁸ The racial classifications that had undergirded enslavement and indentureship did not disappear but were one layer of a racial hierarchy (whether practiced strictly or casually) in which lighter skin or outright whiteness lent the efficiency of visibility to social relations and allocation of resources operating in a symbolic universe of goodness, justice, and ethics. Ruthie Gilmore’s discussion of “the state’s management of racial categories”—a “management through racialization” that “protects” some racial groups from (or “sacrifices” others to) what it considers to be “legitimate violence”—is helpful here in its mobilization of the language of *infrastructure*: the state’s “racist ideological and material practices are infrastructure that needs to be updated, upgraded, and modernized periodically.”⁹ Gilmore also notes that this “updating” is made necessary by the racial state’s own contradictions—its “reach” as well as its “hesitations.” Thus we could see as contradictory the fact that colonial authorities with an ear to the ground in Trinidad would have advised the Colonial Office to be more accommodating to the demands of residents in the period leading up to events in 1903. But alongside this example of colonial

authority at odds with itself, we could imagine that colonial subjects' gender, class, ethnicity, race, generation, or disposition might prompt responses to these "hesitations" or "upgrades" that reflected divergent attitudes of propriety. "We are all English," to refer to an earlier example, could be read as both imperial solidarity and dissent, for a particular raced and classed constituency. In other contexts that do not center a mediating whiteness, the interactions *between* dark-skinned Caribbean people are weighted with fraught histories of servitude and degradation, in the wake of colonialism, enslavement, and indentureship, as demonstrated in fiction in particular.

Caribbean people's contestation of the discursive framing of the region as morally filthy (a framing that could be cross-class and local, or that pitted "local" against colonial authorities who were resident or located in the metropole) allows us to "hear" or "see" water and waste pipes even when these are not made explicit. "Smelly alleys," in the reformist terms of the 1930s to 1950s, designated those who lived in zones of the city with households headed by unmarried women, and sometimes the retort of "respectable" colonial subjects was to affirm the importance of normative households headed by a male patriarch, or to argue that single-headed households were less "smelly" than nonheteronormative households in the metropole.¹⁰ Explicitly or implicitly, allusions to water and waste may allude to (local and expatriate) reformers, to the colonial authorities who endorsed or admonished them, and to the working-class colonial subjects who ignored or otherwise frustrated them. Confined within and also thwarting "spatial grids of morality," colonial residents enjoyed or labored for others in exclusive clubs or elaborate gardens; they used rivers and streams for baptism and sacred propitiation, in Christian, Christian-adjacent, Muslim, and Hindu ceremonies; and even in their most apparent subjection we are encouraged to see them claiming their pleasure and autonomy. Here I have in mind Caribbean laundresses in the social landscape and the fictive canvases and narratives of nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists, administrators, and nationalists as well as the speculation that there was cross-class nude swimming in the nineteenth century.¹¹

As Caribbean people sought to seize their freedoms or to curtail that of their neighbors, they must have wondered about how their modes of getting rid of waste or accessing water differed from that of previous generations; or if their ability to withstand drought, hurricanes, or diseases was any more efficient than that of their forbears. Elsewhere in the Americas, water's identification with violent dispossession or relief from

the heat is captured by the segregated water fountain and by the hoses turned against Black people in the Jim Crow south. Iconicized in film, the water sprinkler becomes a release of pent-up energy: a measure of the urban deserts of descendants of Black migrants from the South and of putatively white migrants from Europe, bringing relief from the heat but also prefiguring or serving as a backdrop for spectacular domestic violence or interracial violence.¹² Across the Caribbean the standpipe became an emblem of life on the edge of cities such as Port of Spain and Kingston for those thousands who began to “pitch camp . . . on the eyebrow of the enemy” in the early twentieth century.¹³ New relations of capital framed this movement from a rural location into the barracks and tenement yards that would become the scourge and vitality of the era. The standpipe eliminated long treks, weighed down with containers, to a river or stream, but it also meant jostling with others in a queue as well as changed relations to the natural world and perhaps relative privacy of the rural location (though this is surely a romanticization of space, access, and resources in the rural context). Today “Standpipe” identifies a community in urban St Andrew, Jamaica, whose very name might be said to encapsulate the familiarity with resilience and disaster, and of being consistently sidestepped by state and nation, that is identified with communities traditionally served by standpipes.¹⁴

In mid-twentieth-century fiction identified with nationalism and Windrush-era migration, the standpipe indexes shame about an abject past: “A leaning standpipe dripped on a mossy base and fed the gutter. . . . Beyond the standpipe Mr. Biswas turned into a passage. . . . He felt he had become a boy again. All the sense of weakness and shame returned.”¹⁵ It can also be a sort of shorthand for working-class women’s labor, and in particular Black women’s public physical and affective labor.¹⁶ But circumstances of deprivation can also become the basis of something that is later recalled as a virtue, as the necessary travails of the future nation: look at what we overcame. Today postcards and their captions or posts on social media communicate this sense of recalling a past that tested the mettle of the future nation (gone soft in the present, for instance) or celebrate the public conviviality of washing sand off the body.¹⁷ In an iconic image from the 1950s, Jamaican artist Barry Watson depicts a woman on a bed bending down toward her young son, seated on a *chimney* or chamberpot.¹⁸ In richly rendered skin tones of brown, the painting’s centering of a Black woman in a boudoir rebukes a history of European portraiture that confined her to a strategic marginality, anchoring respectable or hypersexual white

femininities, for instance. Even in a subsequent era's turn away from a faith in realism's capacity to represent or redeem, what it would have meant to center her so resplendently seems indisputable. At the same time, her luxurious full-bodied repose represents the affective labor that is elicited from the female subject on behalf of the nation's beautiful boy-savior. The image captures his strain, but this is the pleasure of the strain of voiding in the context of the maternal caress. Generations later and in a decidedly nonmaternal register, a politician has used "laying pipes" (in a riposte to rivals' critique of her party's failure to deliver needed infrastructure) to affirm but also undermine expectations of gendered political behavior on the electioneering platform.¹⁹

I appreciate that *water* and *waste* are everyday discussions in the region about groundwater and low-flush toilets, even as I am mobilizing them here for pasts that are recalled in order to shame or to convey fortitude, or the familial and communal disaster associated with the apparent inevitability of women's labor and sexuality to produce or intensify this shame.²⁰ Water or its absence is related to the ability or failure to be clean, physically and morally. Waste encompasses past and present as a sign of the Caribbean's particular relationship to modernity: "walking compost hideously promising tender cane and silky cotton," as Aimé Césaire describes the region's reduction to manure (*fumier*) in order to facilitate the imperial center's luxurious prosperity and normality.²¹ Waste names a surplus, an "already degraded, disposable, and criminal population" even prior to being trafficked to the Americas as enslaved, and continues to name the degradation caused by the transnational war on drugs of the last two decades of the twentieth century, and by regulations regarding money laundering and the financing of terrorism at the dawn of the twenty-first century, causing "mass incarceration, the forced destruction of livelihoods, deportation, militarized state violence, and loss of sovereignty" for resident and diasporic Caribbean people.²² Even the discourse of waste as "renewable" in our environmentally conscious present conceals the ecological and human devastation of sugarcane cultivation in the continuing reverberations of empire and colonialism.²³

In exploring waste and water infrastructure, I am drawing on Tao Leigh Goffe's discussion of an "affective infrastructure" of shops and mutual listening in the 1950s, as Black patrons and Chinese shopkeepers gathered around the sound systems that were foundational to the development of Jamaica's popular music.²⁴ Goffe and Brian Larkin show how the built space of the grocery store in rural Jamaica or the cinema in

Kano, northern Nigeria, could become an “assemblage” of sounds, images, and convening in the first half of the twentieth century—“a social event [generating] an electrical charge of excitement.”²⁵ For Larkin, the sociality of colonial subjects with one another upended the authorities’ fetishization of technology in the colonized space, with the “bright images” of new cinemas that were supposed to dazzle with the “grandeur” of the “colonial sublime”: “Awe produced by technology, while mighty, is at the same time vulnerable and short-lived.”²⁶ In these examples, *infrastructure* indicates a system of circulating goods and services and the attendant social stratification: “the totality of both technical and cultural systems that create institutionalized structures whereby goods of all sorts circulate, connecting and binding people into collectivities,” as Larkin puts it, further pointing out that these are never “*neutral* conduits.”²⁷ Systems associated with technological “progress” come to be associated with colonial authorities or with local authorities charged with overseeing these transformations, but also with some affective response by the general population that is out of line with or outside of the will of the colonial regime.

A few years before the 1903 protests in Trinidad, city councilors in Jamaica debated the best way of commemorating the British regent’s diamond jubilee.²⁸ They considered proposals for vocational schools, for a hospital, and, responding to terrible conditions of drought in some parishes, for the boring of new wells. These proposals to “honor her majesty with practicality and charity” ultimately resulted in a statue of Queen Victoria, which still stands today, suggestive of Larkin’s definition of the “colonial sublime”: “Europeans’ tactile and symbolic effort to make technology mean.”²⁹ In this sense, the statue was the best possible manifestation of any possible proposal for a project of infrastructure, rather than its violent erasure, for would not such an object, and the sovereign it represented, slake the thirst and ease the pains that wells and hospitals purported to be able to do, and do so in a way that would be both enduring and aesthetically pleasing? The statue’s marbled whiteness mocked the civic investment in technology and social services as prosaic or crass; or it reflected a colonial community’s expedient realization that only particular structures could meet the demands of a public commemoration of the sovereign. In any case, we could think of wells, hospitals, and technical institutes as shadowy forms of the statue; or of the statue as a ghost, haunted by debates about water access, health care, and vocational education. Entwined with each other, public amenity and sculptural object press us to disentangle them, perhaps—can’t a standpipe

just be a standpipe?²—but also to see how tax legislation, public memorial, nostalgic posts on social media, or fictional memory of delight or terror are not so obviously distinct from each other.

The same infrastructure can have different historical and current associations in another location, even within the Caribbean. This reminds us to be careful about toggling back and forth between multiple contexts, such as geographical location within the region, or a twenty-first-century novel and turn-of-the-twentieth-century debates (whether decorous town council meeting or indecorous street protest) about public services; and to attend to the aesthetic and affective dimensions of these contexts at different times. In Cuba, for example, bells appeared to have had a particular resonance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that they did not have elsewhere in the region. Bells sacralized the violent regime of sugar production, as enslaved people on plantations in central Cuba “began [each day] to the nine chimes of the Ave Maria and ended to the nine chimes of Vespers. Another bell summoned [them] at noon to return to work until [they] heard the evening call to prayer, when they left the fields to . . . do other marginal jobs.”³⁰ Coupled with the bell tower, the bell was an infrastructure of surveillance as it also efficiently shepherded hundreds from one task to the next. A bell’s timbre and rhythm identified it as originating from a particular estate; it signaled fire or that someone had attempted to run away. Mobilizing affect differently after slavery’s abolition (though this assumes that we can presume to know the affective responses to the daily life of enslavement and its immediate aftermath), the bell might acquire other associations: a memory of a particular sociality that was not solely defined by enslavement; new meanings of sugar production attached to wars of independence or to revolution; or an aesthetic association with craftsmanship, taste, prosperity, beauty. Patricia Alvarez Astacio has proposed that we could think of the bell *as an infrastructure* when it is actively convening bodies, machinery, and crops in a particular context of time and space, understanding that it might not always serve this function as it takes on other meanings in other contexts, over time.³¹

In novels and poetry of the turn-of-the-century period of the protest in Trinidad and the discussions in Jamaica, a statue memorializing a white aristocratic visitor, or the excoriation of a Black policeman because his uniform indicates a life of straitened circumstances in a parish suffering extended drought, are themes that pose questions of utility, taste, and posterity in a changing social order.³² In novels and short stories of the last two decades, collecting water at a stream or a standpipe or emptying

a chimney are actions that produce or recall moments of desire as well as shame, in storylines that move between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and a present of political and psychological stasis or upheaval in the 1950s, 1970s, or the early twenty-first century.

TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY FICTIONS OF WATER AND WASTE

Clotelle was hidden in a well, or a cellar. . . .

Austin Clarke, *The Polished Hoe* (2004)³³

Recent fiction is striking in its return to the scene of the clandestine gaze. Why do writers want us to consider the penalties of forbidden desire? Because the struggle for *sexual* (as opposed to, say, economic and political) liberation has never been communally claimed or acknowledged? Because this struggle *is* behind us, but we take it for granted? Sharon Leach's protagonist in the short story "Desire" (2022) stares at a male bather whose lack of embarrassment about his public exposure only seems to exacerbate her sense that her own gaze is both public and forbidden.³⁴ In Marcia Douglas's *Marvelous Equations of the Dread* (2016), Hector's fascination with his beloved, Winnie, begins when he first sees her at a riverbank (her neck posed just so because of the burden of the pan of water she is carrying on her head): "Her neck so long and straight and pretty make you want kiss it."³⁵ Winnie's father sees him looking at her and sends a white English overseer from the nineteenth century to torment him in his sleep with the question, "Who do you love?" Answering "Winnie" earns him a whipping, while the response "Long live the Queen, Sar" grants him a reprieve. Not only does Hector's submission to the authority of father-in-law and overseer (sar/sir), as well as monarch, come at a terrible price, it is never-ending, since all subsequent intimate interactions with Winnie are tainted by these nocturnal punishments. Whenever he cries out in pain, she assumes that it is a response to their lovemaking. The specter of the imperial regent, as well as an agent of plantation management, converge to punish Black masculine desire, a punishment wielded by the figure of the Black patriarch to assert control over his daughter's intimate life.

In Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, a man demonstrates his self-ownership as he removes a condom and washes himself at the public standpipe in a tenement yard: he "scrub everywhere with rag and soap as if the standpipe and the tree build for him alone even though it wasn't even his regular woman house."³⁶ This public exposure

gives spectators like the narrator, Bam Bam, an opportunity to explore (and condemn himself for) desires that are not socially permitted—in this case both the sexual desire for another man, and equally if not more so a desire for the other man’s innate freedom to act fully on his own behalf, in the violent constraints of their postcolonial abjection in the mid-1970s.

Contemporary novels sketch out a social cartography of waste and of water access, in the highly charged political contexts of the 1970s and 1980s in James’s Kingston and on the eve of the flight of the ruling Duvalier dynasty in Edwidge Danticat’s Port-au-Prince, Haiti. “What kind of journalist you be if you don’t want to know the backstory?”³⁷ This is the critique of a visiting journalist who fails to see the true nature of Kingston’s social landscape: “Picture it, white boy. Two standpipe. Two bathroom. Five thousand people. No toilet. No running water. . . . The largest sewage treatment plant so uptown can flush they shit straight down to we.” In “Monkey Tails,” “Monsieur Christophe’s water station,” a standpipe outside of his establishment in the Haitian capital, is a visible sign of power, establishing water as a commodity that can be privatized and then monetized, as it is sold to others who purchase it by the bucket and sometimes resell it by the cup in other areas of the city.³⁸ This water station convenes and organizes a social world that recognizes the proprietor as having the most social power in that community: after all, whoever controlled “water or bread” would always be in power.³⁹ Water is the sole engine of any sense of kinship between the proprietor and the woman who gets discounted water and little else, as a consequence of giving birth to his son—a child who cannot be legally recognized because the proprietor is married. It is water that maintains the connection between the proprietor and this household across the street comprised of the boy and his mother; she gets to purchase water that she can then resell; the proprietor’s wife never faces “the living results” of his “indiscretions”; and the boy and his mother are thus simultaneously socially ignored and recognized.⁴⁰

Covered in mud, two female characters in novels set in Trinidad and Jamaica (or what could be read as a proxy for these territories) position themselves just outside of the natal or marital homes that ought to signify sexual propriety for descendants of enslaved and indentured subjects who are assumed to be innately savage. In Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Mala’s attachment to the natural world is a repudiation of the sexual violence worked out on her body inside the home, as a consequence both of the male colonial subject’s failure to reproduce

heteronormative patriarchal domination in his household and his entitlement to require his female family members to pay violently for this presumed failure.⁴¹ Vera, a light-skinned middle-class woman in Maisy Card's *These Ghosts Are Family*, flouts social norms by consorting with her dark-skinned working-class employee, Bernard. Treating him as her sexual serf, an entitlement of her class privilege—she “fucked the soul out of him and left him with nothing”—she is both predatory and submissive: “she let him pin her down, completely naked in the wet dirt. . . . wriggling beneath him, like a pig.”⁴² Responding to the idea that it is precisely this animality which undergirded the civilizing mission of colonial enslavement and indentureship as well as the project of respectability that has haunted postcolonial nationalism, Andil Gosine has recently suggested that Caribbean people should claim this animality, as a repudiation both of the idea that Caribbean people are pathological and of the assumption that an affiliation with animals and with nature is degrading.⁴³

For Vera's children, her funeral is a traumatic rehearsal of the memories of their abuse at her hands. Reencountering Bernard, the “yard boy” of their childhood, reminds them of the ignominy of their present situation as migrants in the United States who must now bathe strangers. Cleaning others' waste concretizes their sense of anger and shame at the social dislocations of the 1970s and 1980s, which removed some barriers to social mobility for working-class Jamaicans and sent many privileged Jamaicans abroad as a consequence: “Over foreign, we were the Bernards—we were the underclass; we were home health aides, janitors, and nannies. We would think of him and spit the next time we helped elderly women wipe themselves over toilets. We would think that it was all his fault. If people like him would have stayed in their place, then we could have stayed too.”⁴⁴ Even as Vera is clearly marked as an abuser of family members, of those who work for her, and possibly also of her neighbors, she also suffers trauma at the hands of her marital partner and of at least one person who seizes the opportunity to abuse her corpse. It is also notable that her children seem to blame her for their downward social mobility, and here we could speculate that her own sexual desire and the will to act on it, as a woman and mother of a particular social status, renders her especially culpable and dangerous.

In Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe*, set in Barbados in the 1950s, the immediate aftermath of the murder of a violent patriarch sets the stage for Mary Mathilde and Manny, the two major characters through

whom most of the novel is focalized, to piece together (and identify as harmful) memories of sexual abuse and racial violence, as part of the legacy of enslavement. Wells, cellars, tunnels, and pipes help to frame this reckoning with past and present. The memory of an enslaved girl who was “hidden in a well, or a cellar” before being discovered and hanged continues to haunt the present, as a memory of slavery’s brutality, while a tunnel connecting the plantation to the sea holds memories of the brutal punishment of enslaved insurgents and canecutters demanding higher wages as well as of the sexual grooming of Mary Mathilde by the former plantation overseer who has just been murdered.⁴⁵ For Manny, walking through the tunnel in the present of the 1950s evokes the sensation of migrants hiding unsuccessfully from the police in the underground sewage system of an American city, and thus a violent Caribbean plantocracy finds its modern equivalent in the surveillance of the North American state. Mary Mathilde has specific sexual memories of the overseer bringing her here weekly to assault her with his fingers—“I grooming you for later. I waiting till you get more ripper, girl”—as she is prepared as a little girl to be raped by and bear children for this particular overseer, inheriting the sexual place of both her mother and her grandmother.⁴⁶

As the overseer cynically dissociates her mother’s dual roles as his nonconsensual paramour (“Tell *May* I want to see her”) and the mother of a very young rape victim (“Don’t tell *your mother*”), he allows us to see how the tunnel facilitates dissimulation: the smuggling, torture, and sexual grooming of Black people by white and functionally white elites are permissible but also exceed the public moral propriety of the plantocracy and colonial regime.⁴⁷ The tunnel conceals this violent hypocrisy. Mary Mathilde and Manny’s memories or experience of the tunnel as a locus of danger and terror, whether personal or not, specific to Barbados or transnational, suggest how an older infrastructure of terror and capture has been repurposed: the underground passage in the Caribbean is aligned with the modern underground sewer in the United States in the world of the novel, for instance, or we could connect Clotelle’s demise in the well to the discussion of public infrastructure in at least one colony, with a recommendation of the boring of wells.

Saidiya Hartman has shown how the dungeon that held African people for weeks and months in forts on the West African coast became “a womb in which the slave was born . . . a way station for human refuse . . . [transforming] waste into capital”; while Louis P. Nelson follows the movement of captives through these dungeons to the holds of the

ships onto which they were forcibly boarded for the months-long transatlantic journey, and then through the underground tunnels of elite homes in Caribbean cities, as they were moved from ships to above-ground courtyard auctions to be displayed and sold from these homes.⁴⁸ Fictional tunnels and wells that concealed bodies and objects or facilitated their movement and disposal continue to be utilized by later generations (wells or streams, for example) or are reconstituted as modern systems of waste disposal (as in underground sewer systems), and they still carry memories or sensations of violation in the characters' present. And since part of the legacy of violence is the way in which one might experience this violence as deserved, or at least as being within the realm of what must be endured, characters work out and refigure the meaning of these legacies in their conversations with one another or in the course of their own inner ruminations.

In the foregoing discussion I have been interested in the gendered and sexual implications of this violence for female characters. As Mary Mathilde comes to understand these negotiations as an extraordinary violence that was wrought on her and her mother and grandmother (rather than, say, a necessary rite of passage for the relatively elevated social position she now enjoys), we could view her in the way that historians of enslaved women have, as "someone who understands her own value—both the value which can't be quantified and that which can."⁴⁹ In Danticat's story, buying and selling water suggests how kinship can be shrugged off or made transactional in a way that reinforces existing hierarchies, as a mother and her son make use of a precarious relationship with a powerful man in the best way they can. Card, Danticat, and Clarke suggest that mothers in particular are positioned as the agents of vulnerability of their families and their descendants. In any case, we see them asserting sexual desire, narrational frankness about sexual histories, and economic independence, even in the knowledge that it is transgressive to do so.

But all gendered and sexed subjects in these novels must come to terms with the ways in which, in the wake of colonialism, enslavement, and indentureship, the postcolonial subject inherits the condition of being exploitable and disposable—and as having had value because of this capacity. As we have seen, contemporary contexts of intimacy and self-fashioning are still shrouded with these violent legacies. Rolling around in the mud or emptying someone else's chimney are a reminder that their capacity to desire or to prosper is considered to be innately sinful or abject, and certainly surveilled, as a consequence of legacies of

sexual pleasure that are impossible to disentangle from coerced sexual labor for the pleasure of others. As they experience modern infrastructure that is a reconstitution of the technology which kept bodies and objects moving in a deadly circuit of labor and punishment, they are figuring out how to fashion themselves in the knowledge of this legacy of waste—of having been valued as waste. While there is certainly a possibility of transcending or at least refiguring this inheritance, their negotiations with one another suggest that the process of scripting or rescripting the self takes place in the context of (rather than being external to) the rehearsal of the circuit of this traumatic legacy.

NOTES

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1. Laurence, "The Trinidad Water Riot"; Richardson, *Igniting the Caribbean's Past*, chap 6.
2. Laurence, "Trinidad Water Riot" 15, 19 n.11.
3. Brereton, *History of Modern Trinidad*, 146–49.
4. For a critique of the treatment of protesters in a regional editorial, see "The Lesson of the Riot," *The Gleaner*, September 20, 1904, 8. On Lazare's organization, the Ratepayers Association, as an important vector of Black Trinidadian political mobilization, including veterans of anti-imperial and pan-African activism in southern Africa, see Brereton, *History of Modern Trinidad*; Laurence, "Trinidad Water Riot," 20 n.14; and Collis-Buthelezi, "Caribbean Regionalism," 53.
5. Mary Seacole gives us a rich account of her own medical expertise, in identifying the causes of and cure for cholera ahead of the colonial medical establishment, as a middle-class Caribbean woman

practicing in the region and Central America; see Seacole, *Wonderful Adventures*.

6. Jaffe, "Dirt, Disease, and Difference." In "From Cesspool to Sewer," Michelle Allen's discussion of the disappearance of nightsoil men whose physical presence maintained the boundary between middle-class observer and working-class laborer in London, along with Jaffe's close readings of 1850s British social policy, the entanglement of colony and metropole in racializing (differently but relatedly) working-class whiteness in the UK city, on one hand, and cross-class and -race colonial and imperial subjects, on the other, are well illustrated.
7. Jaffe, "Dirt, Disease, and Difference," 181.
8. On the intimacies of postabolition societies, see, for instance, Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*.
9. Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 264, 265. I am aware that Gilmore's specific U.S. contexts are not identical with those of the Caribbean, though I want to claim their usefulness for the postabolition Americas in general.
10. On "smelly alleys" in mid-twentieth-century discourse, see Chin, "Antihomosexuality and Nationalist Critique." On the connection between the Wolfenden Report on homosexuality in the UK and Caribbean residents as well as migrants to the UK, see Chin as well as Ellis, "Between Windrush and Wolfenden." See also discussions of the sexed colonial body (and particularly that of the single woman) as a prism through which to understand the logic of the colonial state, within and beyond the Caribbean: Parsard, "Barrack Yard Politics"; and Mitra, *Indian Sex Life*.
11. Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar*, introduction and chapter 4; Moore and Johnson, "They Do as They Please," 240–41.
12. Coppola, *The Godfather*; and Lee, *Do the Right Thing*.
13. Lovelace, *Dragon Can't Dance*, 10–11.
14. This community battled a fire earlier in 2023: Witter, "Early Morning Fire." See also Philp, "Standpipe."
15. Naipaul, *House for Mr. Biswas*, 430.
16. See George Lamming's discussion of "ferocious fights" between women, and between women and men, "at the open standpipe," though here he means the rural village rather than an urban location, in Scott, "The Sovereignty of the Imagination."
17. "Beautiful Barbados"; The Pan Collective, "The Standpipe."

18. Barry Watson, *Mother and Child* (1958–59), <https://nationalgalleryofjamaica.wordpress.com/2016/01/27/in-memoriam-barrington-watson>.
19. For a disapproving reaction to cabinet minister and future prime minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar’s declaration that the only pipes she knew were her husband’s, see Shah, “Political Pipers at St. Augustine.”
20. Cashman, “Water Security”; and Williams-Raynor, “Jamaicans Cautioned.”
21. Césaire, *Notebook*, 28; and Césaire, *Cahier*.
22. Mullings, “Criminalization,” 170, 171.
23. Paravisini-Gebert, “Bagasse.”
24. Goffe, “Bigger Than the Sound.”
25. Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 2.
26. Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 36, 43.
27. Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 6 (emphasis mine).
28. See Petrina Dacres’s discussion of the proposals for and the erection of this statue, “‘Keeping Alive Before the People’s Eyes,’” and the following newspaper articles: “Her Majesty’s Diamond Jubilee Celebration: Proposed Establishment of Tanks and Wells Throughout the Island,” *The Gleaner*, March 23, 1897, 7; “The Diamond Jubilee Memorial,” *The Gleaner* March 24, 1897, 4; “Victoria Tanks and Wells,” letter to the editor by Moses Bravo, *The Gleaner* April 8, 1897, 8.
29. Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 42.
30. Moreno Fragnals, *The Sugarmill*, 148, cited in Tezano Toral, “Architecture,” 116. Besides Cuba, plantations in Louisiana, Dutch Guiana in South America, and Cape Town, South Africa, had estate bells, perhaps indicating a Spanish Catholic provenance and a Dutch Reformed one; yet other Spanish Caribbean territories in the Caribbean do not appear to have had this tradition.
31. In personal conversation, June 2023.
32. See Cobham, *Rupert Gray*; McKay, “Midnight Woman”; Smith, *Strolling in the Ruins*.
33. Clarke, *The Polished Hoe*, 323.
34. Leach, “Desire.”
35. For this and the following quotations, see Douglas, *Marvelous Equations*, 69–70.
36. James, *Brief History*, 79.
37. James, *Brief History*, 452.
38. Danticat, “Monkey Tails,” 139, 145.
39. Danticat, “Monkey Tails,” 146.

40. Danticat, "Monkey Tails," 146, 159–60.
41. Mootoo, *Cereus Blooms at Night*.
42. Card, *These Ghosts Are Family*, 70, 82.
43. Gosine, *Nature's Wild*.
44. Card, *These Ghosts Are Family*, 83.
45. Clarke, *The Polished Hoe*, 323.
46. Clarke, *The Polished Hoe*, 360.
47. Clarke, *The Polished Hoe*, 361 (emphasis mine).
48. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 111; Nelson, *Architecture and Empire*.
49. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, x.

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